

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At the November 1986 meeting of the Governing Board of the United Methodist Church, a resolution was adopted to "develop a process whereby the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States and the United Methodist Church could jointly develop a study and report on the issue of homosexuality."

Following this, a study committee was formed at the May 1987 Governing Board Meeting. The committee was charged with the task of developing a study and report on the issue of homosexuality. The committee's report was presented to the Governing Board at the November 1987 meeting.

A BACKGROUND PAPER: CONSULTATION III, SEPT. 19, 1987 Atlanta, Georgia

"MCC/NCC -- And The Ecclesiology Issue"

August 14, 1987

"The Context for MCC's Approach to Ecclesiology: Questioning the Issue"

Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2026 with funding from
CLIR DHC Grant 2026-2028

<https://archive.org/details/2174.15.24>

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

At the November 1983 meeting of the Governing Board action was taken to "develop a process whereby the National Council of the Churches of Christ/USA and the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches can remain in study and conversation together."

President Philip Cousin named a committee at the May 1984 Governing Board Meeting to begin to develop such a process for presentation to the November 1984 Governing Board Meeting. The following recommendation was presented and approved by the November 1984 Governing Board Meeting:

"That the process of study and learning continue throughout the 1985-87 triennium, shepherded by a Steering Committee of 5-6 persons drawn from the membership of the Governing Board and representatives of the UFMCC. In the fall of the year, for a day and a half in conjunction with the meeting of the Governing Board, a consultation will be held on one of the three concerns identified by the Governing Board in November 1983 as needing additional attention: Christian unity and ecclesiology, biblical interpretation, and human sexuality. Each consultation would involve a different group of Board members with members of the UFMCC, bringing together a group small enough to be manageable and large enough to represent the ecclesial diversity of the NCCC. . . that the denominations name the persons to these consultation, allowing the Steering Committee to round out the delegation to assure the desired ecclesial diversity."

These Consultations were held:

Consultation I	Biblical Interpretation	May 23-24, 1986	New Orleans, LA
Consultation II	Human Sexuality	Nov. 7-8, 1986	Chicago, IL
Consultation III	Ecclesiology	Sept. 19, 1987	Atlanta, GA

The application for membership in the National Council of Churches of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches has raised many substantive ecumenical issues for both of us. Early on, someone in the NCCC said that one of our areas of contention was "ecclesiology", i.e., in what sense is, or is not MCC "church", in the sense that other churches in the Council are "church"? This brought up unresolved internal NCCC issues concerning how NCCC communions view one another as church. Obviously there is a plurality of ecclesiologies within the NCCC. The question for us is, is MCC so unique in its ecclesiology, or so different that ecclesiology can be rightly identified as an area of serious disagreement with member communions of the NCCC?

While I do think that the NCCC has deep and pervasive ecclesiological issues, many of which are being courageously explored in bilateral ecumenical dialogues, and of course in the BEM effort, which we in MCC have participated in, that continue to be a part of the creative tension of its internal life, I believe that the ecclesiological "issue" vis-a-vis MCC is bogus and really a smoke-screen. This paper is an attempt to explain why I believe that to be the case.

The issue is not whether MCC is a church legally, doctrinally or institutionally. That is indisputable fact according to the NCC's own definitions and criteria for membership. On that basis the NCCC's own Constituent Membership Committee voted unanimously, in March 1982, that the UFMCC was eligible for membership. The issue is whether or not we are a "legitimate" church based on our primary outreach to homosexuals. Other churches with the NCC, by their own admission, also reach out to homosexuals. Some also have theological/ethical positions about homosexuality that do not substantially differ from UFMCC. Is it then a matter of a "primary" focus of reaching out to homosexuals that is the issue or is it the percentage of homosexuals in the church? What would then be a "legitimate" percentage?

One Governing Board Member of the NCCC said "You cannot organize a church around homosexuality". I think that is probably a very true statement. And it is not true that UFMCC is "organized" around homosexuality. The question is, is the UFMCC organized around legitimizing a kind of behavior? Or is it a church reaching out to a kind of people? This is the crux of the issue that is mislabeled "ecclesiology". We may really be back to "theological Anthropology". Are gays and lesbians a kind of people, or only a kind of behavior? And is homosexuality per se unacceptable in a Christian context? Inevitably, that is the question we return to.

Gay men and lesbians are not reducible to homosexual behavior. To do that is to engage in homophobia. Persons who are not gay or lesbian sometimes engage in homosexual behavior for a variety of reasons (signifying the biological bisexual potential of the majority of human beings). However, only about 10-20% ever identify as gay or lesbian.

I believe that gay men and lesbians constitute a kind of people, a unique kind of ethnic group that have always existed (with a history) and that exist every where (with

cross-cultural variations). Today more and more of the history of my people, and our universality, is demonstrable.

If we (as gay men and lesbians) are only identifiable by homosexual sexual behavior, it would indeed have been difficult (maybe impossible) to form a church around that behavior. It would not be church, then, but perhaps some sort of "cult homosexuality". I think that is an uninformed misimpression that some folks in the NCCC have of UFMCC. This is always dispelled once people come to understand that we see ourselves as a Christian Church with an outreach to a certain kind of people. If we are a people (one of whose characteristics is an inclination towards homoerotic attraction and homosexual behavior); a people who have a common culture, history, struggles, needs, dialects, roles -- then it is not hard to understand how our people might need a church.

The reduction of gay men and lesbians to homosexual behavior is an insidious tool of homophobic oppression. Often times ethnic minorities are hypersexualized and become the object of sexual projection by the dominant culture. In addition, since a primary characteristic of our "ethni" is our sexual orientation, this method of oppression is compounded. To some critics of our movement, it seems as though gay men and lesbians are "merely" fighting for the right to choose a particular kind of sexual partner. While that is true in part, the nature of our oppression is much deeper than that. And the consequences of homophobic oppression are much more far reaching than deprivation of sexual expression. The fact is, that historically, gay men and lesbians have been murdered by the millions just for being gay or lesbian -- or for being suspected of being gay or lesbians, or associated with gays or lesbians, whether or not we ever had sex with anyone. Homophobia, like racism or sexism has deep psychic/political roots in human history that defy simplistic, reductionist analysis. The trivialization of our oppression is itself a painful part of the experience of every gay person.

One of the unique characteristics of our oppression that gets overlooked by trivialization is the experience of being "different" from members of one's family, most, of whom are likely not to be gay or lesbian. Exclusion from primary social units (especially family and church) in overt or subtle ways continues to constitute much of the greatest pain for gay men and lesbians.

I remember a difficult moment for me that captured the issue of trivialization. On the eve of the first vote on our eligibility for membership in the NCC (Nov. 83) I met with the then NCCC President, James Armstrong. He told me about his trip to Egypt to visit Pope Shenuda, the Coptic Pope of Egypt, who was then under house arrest. "That's real oppression", he said to me. The implication was, of course that gay men and lesbians are merely "inconvenienced" by having to be "discreet" about our sexual proclivities. Surely a small price to pay, he implied. When I attempted, once more, to communicate that the cost of homophobia is enormous -- to gays and lesbians and to their heterosexual family members and friends; that it is a life threatening problem

(even more so today because of aids); that homophobia kills people, relationships, families, hurts churches, wastes time and gifts, he could not hear me.

The comparison of oppressions by persons who experience neither of them is an odious and divisive tactic. I felt deeply stung that someone of Bishop Armstrong's reputation could stoop to that tactic, and, in essence, blame MCC for the "trouble" the NCCC was having with our application. In speaking for others leaders of the council, he told me our application might very well destroy the Council. Incredulous, I told him I seriously doubted that we had the power to do that; nor did I think many people would choose to side with MCC over and against the present unity (imperfect as it may be) of the Council. Of course, I had no way of knowing Bishop Armstrong's own state of mind at the time (he resigned as President just weeks later).

His trivialization only makes sense if homosexual behavior per se is the issue, rather than gay and lesbian people as people, being the issue. How do I know that we are a people, and not just a category of persons who happen to engage in homosexual behavior?

- 1) There is now historical documentation of the history of gay men and lesbians, particularly in Western and Native cultures (see Boswell, Jonathan Katz, Judy Grahn). Ancient mythology and history is filled with the lives of gay men and lesbians, and with gay/lesbian themes.
- 2) There are now cross cultural studies of homosexual behavior that indicate a universal presence of gays and lesbians. The forms of homosexual culture vary depending on many factors, such as sexism, racism, urbanization, religious forms, etc. However, there are basic cultured variations that are emerging. There is an underground gay saying, "We are everywhere". We've always know that, now we are proving it.
- 3) I "came out" into an emerging open gay community 16 years ago. This community (in Boston, Mass.) nurtured me, helped me learn how to live as a lesbian in a hostile culture; it formed newspapers, social organizations, social services and counseling clinics, restaurants and bars, identifiable "ethnic" neighborhoods, professional alliances, cultural events, holidays, churches and synagogues. It was and is a culture that has mores, (that are in flux and change always, as with the dominant culture), folk heroes, political aspirations, our own music, art, humor, and dialects. It takes more than a casual connection by way of a kind of sexual behavior to create this intensely intentional kind of community. It is about heart, soul, blood and "kind". It is "ethni". It takes a deep sense of identifying, caring, commitment, love and passion to build a community in the midst of hostility. In building a church in the midst of this, MCC is as American as apple pie, and H. Richard Niebuhr's Social Sources of Denominationalism. The fact of that "social source" of our denominationalism is so American is sometimes a bit hard for us to translate cross culturally; but the

pre-existence of gay and lesbian communities everywhere, and the attitude of the church everywhere is the seed of our growth worldwide.

- 4) As MCC has expanded worldwide we've discovered that we are everywhere. Even in the most remote parts of the world there is something of a gay or lesbian culture. It may be underground, or highly integrated into the dominant culture, but it is always there. And if the Church is there, it is negative about our people.

Knowing we are a people is one issue. What are the particularities of our peoplehood?

The complexities about gay and lesbian people as a people include the following:

- 1) Most gay men and lesbians can successfully mask or hide their identity and remain "in the closet". While the closet provides at least an illusion of safety in a culture unsafe for gay men or lesbians, it is also a tool of oppression. Closet-dwelling exacerbates feelings of low self-esteem, guilt, etc. In addition, it is emotionally costly and daily stressful to mask a part of one's identity. It causes people to become chronically depressed, fatigued, and they are more vulnerable to self-destructing behavior. It is not possible to overstate the cumulative effects of this problem in our community. It kills people, it damages and wounds them. These facts weaken the immune system — and the reason that gays and lesbians are more vulnerable to diseases of the immune system (aids, lupus, epstein's disease).
- 2) The alternative is to "come out". In the last 20 years there have come to be safer and more acceptable ways to do this. But openly gay people are still a small minority. In recent memory, the only ways to be openly gay were to be ghettoized in one of a very few professions or trades, or to be a street gay person. If you are gay you pay - by staying in the closet or by coming out.
- 3) It is Judy Grahn's book, Another Mother Tongue, that postulates the most convincing theory of the role of gay men and lesbians in human cultures. It seems to be the case that in "primitive" ancient, non-westernized cultures, gay men and lesbians have an honored, valued role. We were (are) seen as "double" people - having the characteristics of both sexes, and able to "transmit" messages across gender lines. We are seen as "transpersons", and are associated with the color for spiritual power/transformation: the color purple. Her documentation of gay men and lesbians historically as shamans, holy people, and cultural religious leaders is thorough and overwhelming.

In Western patriarchal culture gay men and lesbians have been devalued and persecuted, being seen as "half" people (not quite a real man, not quite a real woman). Even so, gay men and lesbians have taken on role functions of a spiritual nature - particularly in the arts and the church (though often closeted). All of us who are gay or lesbian know that if all the gay men and lesbians who

are present active spiritual leaders in our denomination and nations came out - there would be a great gap at the disproportionate representation. In every generation we have known that and have known the insults, threats, deprivation, and persecution.

- 4) At our first consultation, Robin Scroggs made the point that when Paul in the New testament speaks of homosexual behavior he is speaking of pederasty. Scroggs went on to say that that is because that was the only form of homosexual behavior that existed - that there were no adult-adult homosexual relations in ancient Greece or Rome. This argument was an argument from silence on the subject: I violently disagreed with him for these reasons:
 - 1) Any argument from silence is suspect - because something is not written about does not mean it didn't happen. It may simply mean that those who were so engaged had no reason, right or permission to write about it. That adult-adult relations were taboo.
 - 2) Lesbian adult-adult relations are written about - His argument neglected women's relations.
 - 3) The form of homosexual behavior is created by what the dominant culture will permit. Pederasty was "permitted" because boys are more feminine and the adult male could feel less threatened about his maleness if he were having sex with a young male. It wasn't as "queer" as adult-adult relations. A modern similar example is in Muslim cultures where young male prostitutes must cross dress so that the adult male who picks them up can say that he, thought they were female. In some cultures homosexuality is tolerated if it mimics heterosexuality. In cultures where sexism is being addressed, gay men and lesbians are more free to adopt our own ways of being.
 - 4) I know there were gay men and lesbians in Greek Roman times in my heart and spirit -- to erase us from history is like genocide.

Back to ecclesiology; I would like to defer to Rev. Phil Speranza who has framed the following four (4) questions for consideration:

- 1) With respect to what some are apparently calling the "ecclesiological question," the following matters come to mind.
 - A. Even if it were true that the UFMCC were founded "on a behavior", (which is certainly not the case, ut infra), how would that differ in any essential or fundamental way from denominations owing their foundation and distinct identity to race and/or ethnic heritage, e.g.:

1. the historical Black churches in the NCC
 2. the division of American Lutherans into distinct synods which are in effect denominations, on the basis of national origin
 3. the Korean Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A.
 4. the absolutely uncanonical separation of Eastern Orthodox believers into separate jurisdictions based on nationality.
- B. Given that the UFMCC differs from some other denominations in insisting that the Scriptures rightly interpreted do not condemn either homosexuality or homosexual persons or homosexual genital expression as always and necessarily sinful in se, the fact remains that this view of this particular ethical/moral issue does not invalidate the plain statements in MCC By-laws concerning the reason for our existence, viz.:
1. that our first objective is "to bind together churches for the purposes of sharing in the worship of God in the Christian tradition, and to make God's will dominant in the lives of all people, individually and collectively, as set forth in the Holy Scriptures" (Article II,A) and
 2. that the UFMCC is "founded in the interest of offering a church home to ALL who confess and believe" (Article III,A, emphasis added).

Therefore, in what way can our governing documents be in any way interpreted to say that MCC is founded on a "behavior"? Further, are the NCC prepared to say that we are doctrinally wrong to take Jesus exactly and precisely at His word when, in Matthew 11:28, John 3:16,, and John 6:37, Jesus invites all persons, without qualification or distinction as to sexual orientation, age, race, gender, etc., to come to Him?

2. Again given that the UFMCC differs from some other denominations with respect to the ethical/moral/exegetical issue of homosexuality, the fact remains that the denominations presently members of the NCC differ from one another on other ethical/moral issues, e.g.:
 - A. abortion
 - B. capital punishment
 - C. masturbation
 - D. divorce.

I would like to point out that if the Eastern Orthodox members are to be consistent with the Sacred Canons, they must say openly that:

- A. abortion is sinful and is to be punished by excommunication (Canon II of St. Basil the Great; Canon XXI of St. John the Faster)

- B. masturbation is sinful and is to be punished with excommunication for forty days (Canon VIII of St. John the Fast), and that clergy who masturbate are to be deposed (Canon X of St. John the Faster)
- C. St. John the Faster was criticized in his day for being too lenient in these matters.

Obviously, other denominations in the NCCC take a different view on these issues. Yet the NCC seems quite able to live relatively peacefully with these differences. Why, then, when the issue of homosexuality is in a sense far less important than the issue of abortion, can the NCC not live with the UFMCC in its midst?

- 3. If there are legitimate ecclesiological issues to be raised, there are some which apply very directly to denominations which are already part of the NCC.
 - A. The Anglican and Eastern Orthodox churches teach and profess that Christ's Church necessarily includes the three-fold ministry of bishop, presbyter, and deacon; and that without bishops in apostolic succession there is no valid ministry and no valid Sacraments (or, more precisely, no valid Eucharist). In short they hold episcopacy to be the esse of the Church. Lutherans and others hold that episcopacy is not necessarily of the esse of the Church, but that it is of the bene esse of the Church. Presbyterians, American Baptists, and others reject episcopacy altogether. Touching as it does the very heart and center of the Church's life, the Eucharist, this difference is not "merely" one of polity; it hits on the nature of the Church.

Therefore, the question arises: how is it that the NCC can live relatively comfortably with this profound ecclesiological difference while at the same time refusing us admission on the basis of an ecclesiological issue which, as we have demonstrated, does not in fact exist?

- B. Again on the issue of ministry, some denominations ordain women; others (e.g., the Eastern Orthodox) do not and hold that women cannot validly be ordained. Therefore, the same question as stated immediately above arises.
- C. According to the Sacred Canons, Eastern Orthodox believers are absolutely forbidden even to pray with non-Orthodox persons (Canon X and XLV of the Holy Apostles; Can XXXII of the Council of Laodicea; both given ecumenical force by Canon I of the Fourth Ecumenical Council, Canon II of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, and Canon I of the Seventh Ecumenical Council). Indeed, Canon IX of St. Timothy of Alexandria forbids presbyters to conduct the Eucharistic Liturgy when heterodox are present; and Canon VI of the Council of Laodicea forbids admittance of

the heterodox into Orthodox churches. Yet the Eastern Orthodox members of the NCC have participated in ecumenical prayer services with non-Orthodox, have invited non-Orthodox to attend Orthodox services, and have given non-Orthodox bread from the Litija. How is it, then, the ecclesiological issues raised by the Sacred Canons can be utterly ignored, while at the same time efforts are made to saddle the UFMCC with a non-existent ecclesiological issue?

4. It is evident to all that among the current members of the NCC there are deep and extremely serious differences on the theology and practice of the Sacrament of Baptism, and specifically on
 - A. the question of baptismal regeneration
 - B. the validity of baptism by any means other than immersion or according to Canon XLVII of the Holy Apostles and Canon I of St. Basil the Great, the validity of baptisms administered by non-Orthodox clergy or by laypersons
 - C. whether or not infants and children below the age of reason may be validly baptized.

Given that Baptism touches on the nature of the Church and, more specifically, membership in the Body of Christ, how can the NCC live with these profound differences that touch on the essential life of the Church while refusing membership to the UFMCC, whose theology and practice of Baptism reflects that of at least some of the denominations in the NCC?

There are, of course, other questions concerning differences among NCC members with respect to Eucharistic theology and other aspects of sacramental theology. But neither time nor the continued interest of NCC members permits exploration of those questions. What the bottom line in all this seems to be is that

Given that there is no legitimate ecclesiological issue concerning the UFMCC's foundation and raison d'être; and

Given that within the NCC there are profound differences in sacramental theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, yet these differences do not prevent or preclude the several denominations from being members of the NCC together;

Therefore, why are the NCC continuing to refuse admission to a denomination which seeks membership and which meets all of the stated criteria for membership in the NCC?

